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Review: Michael C. Carhart, The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany

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The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany. By Michael C. Carhart. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press. 2007. Pp. xii + 360. Cloth \$49.95. ISBN 0-674-02617-9.

This is an entertaining book. Its chapters are organized around a series of vignettes: Carsten Niebuhr on camelback negotiating with his Bedouin guides; feral French children skinning rabbits with their bare hands; English gentlemen in Syrian deserts; Captain Cook's lieutenants carving "steaks" from the severed heads of war victims. In case you've lost your bearings, let me assure you that *The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany* is indeed about Enlightenment Germany. But, as the structure of the chapters suggests, Michael Carhart wants to emphasize Germany's myriad connections to the wider world. In other words, eighteenth-century German debates over culture and enlightenment were much more than merely German debates.

For all of its attention to world travel, *The Science of Culture* finds its center of gravity in small-town Göttingen, home to the most prominent university of the German Enlightenment. More specifically, Carhart adopts the term "Göttingen School"—something that has been used to denote everything from universal history and *Statistik* to transcendental biology—to denote a group of scholars interested in "national character in primitive antiquity and the processes of human social development" (p. 4). This rather idiosyncratic definition of the Göttingen School allows Carhart to develop his central thesis: in the period between the Seven Years' War and the French Revolution a group of scholars centered in Göttingen developed a concept of culture that functioned as a "tool" for investigating human social development. In the process, they developed a science of culture.

Carhart proposes that this science of culture, and the "collectivist particularism" that it emphasized, was a *new thing*. But it is not that simple. (It never is, of course: for every origin story, there's some medievalist who knows better.) There were, as Carhart recognizes, plenty of seventeenth-century analogues and precursors to his science of culture. The dividing line between these "erudite antiquarians" and the later "Göttingen School" was, in other words, not nearly as neat as he suggests. Things get even messier around the question of Göttingen's relationship to the larger history of the human sciences. Sometimes, it sounds as though Carhart wants to link his Göttingen scholars directly to the development of the social sciences: "their patient scholarship laid the epistemological and methodological foundations of what would become the nineteenth-century social sciences" (p. 7). At other times, though, he backs away from such strong claims. On the question of whether the collectivist particularism of the Göttingen School can be said to "represent the foundation of the modern human and social sciences," Carhart answers, "no, it does not" (p. 13). Elsewhere, he explains that "modern social science the Göttingen School was not" (p. 298). I was left with the uneasy feeling that, yes, there is

some profound connection between the Göttingen School and the modern social sciences; but we cannot say exactly what it might be.

Happily, a book is much more than its theses. For my money, Carhart's greatest contribution involves introducing English readers to a group of important, though relatively neglected, German Enlightenment scholars—Christian Gottlob Heyne, Christoph Meiners, Johann Jakob Moser, and Johann David Michaelis, among others. He gives voice “to a set of scholars who have not been heard in the past two hundred years . . . The fact that they remain neglected is testimony to the narrowness of inquiry that has characterized intellectual and disciplinary history” (p. 297). In introducing us to these “moderate” German scholars, Carhart certainly wants to widen the focus of inquiry. But he also suggests how we might move beyond the fractured historiography of countless national and regional Enlightenments. In its place, he argues, one can imagine a range of ideological positions, with the Radical Enlightenment on one side and Enlightened Absolutism on the other. Carhart's Göttingen School and its science of culture would fall somewhere in between.

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How Jews Became Germans: The History of Conversion and Assimilation in Berlin. By Deborah Hertz. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 2007. Pp. xii + 276. Cloth \$38.00. ISBN 0300110944. Paper \$24.00. ISBN 0300151640.

This engaging book begins with Deborah Hertz's story of her discovery thirty years ago of detailed records of Jewish conversions in Berlin going back centuries. For the aspiring young social historian, the find must have seemed providential, at the high tide of quantitative methods that placed a premium on massive data. It was the perfect source for the reconstruction of the history of Jewish conversion, at least from the perspective of a social history that emphasized bare numbers. That the records had been amassed from far-flung church records across the city by a Nazi bureaucracy interested in racial classification was poignant, but could not detract from the immense value of the records in reconstructing the chronology and rate of Jewish conversion.

Hertz's first chapter is a reflection on the tainted origins of these nevertheless precious sources. At the same time that Hertz's book appeared, Eric Ehrenreich published a book-length study of Nazi genealogical science, *The Nazi Ancestral Proof: Genealogy, Racial Science, and the Final Solution* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007). While Ehrenreich's study of the genealogy bureaucracy